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Choice as a duty? The abolition of primary school catchment areas in North Rhine-Westphalia/Germany and its impact on parent choice strategies

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Keywords

School segregation, parent school choice, catchment areas, policy reform, social class

Abstract

In 2008, primary school catchment areas were abolished in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)/Germany. Written several years later, this paper's main aim is to provide insights into the impact of the policy reform on parent choice practices and subsequently on educational segregation. Based on a mixed-methods approach, it seeks to understand how being raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system affects parents' understanding of the policy reform and impacts their choice strategies.

We demonstrate that the (socially selective) choice of a school outside the former catchment area increased significantly after 2008, leading to a higher level of school segregation, though affecting schools to very different extents. The study clearly reveals that the differences in choice strategies are shaped by the dissimilar conclusions parents from different educational backgrounds draw from the policy reform. While less-educated parents attribute less significance to

this early stage of schooling, many well-educated ones interpret the introduction of free choice as an instigation to choose – a perception triggered and intensified by the policy reform. For them, choice is no longer only perceived as an opportunity; through its formalisation it rather seems to become a duty. Thus, by one-sidedly favouring well-educated parents' interests and benefiting their abilities to play the game, the reform seems to perpetuate existing inequalities in choice rather than to alleviate them.

Introduction

In 2008, in contrast to most other German federal states, primary school catchment areas were abolished in North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW). The motivation of the ruling coalition in NRW at that time – consisting of the conservative CDU and the liberal FDP – was to fundamentally improve the quality of education 'through an increased focus on performance and competition' (MSW, 2005). One crucial element of this performance- and market-oriented shift in educational policy was to strengthen parental choice. Similar to explanations in other countries (Forsey et al., 2008), it was argued that all parents – and not only the well-educated parents who managed to access schools outside the catchment area even before the reform (Riedel et al., 2010) – should have the opportunity to apply for 'an allegedly "better" primary school' (MSW, 2005) and/or schools with a suitable profile. Introducing free choice was thus expected to induce competition between primary schools, leading to quality improvements in education.

Welcomed by certain parent organisations, the reform was criticised by the opposition parties (reproaching the government for political patronage), education unions, town councils and researchers. They all predicted a socially selective use of school choice – also due to the fact that travel costs are only reimbursed when the nearest primary school is attended (MSW, 2005) – and warned about aggravating school segregation and stigmatisation (Ausschuss für Schule und Weiterbildung, 2006; Brügelmann, 2006; SPD-Landtagsfraktion NRW, 2006). At an administrative level, the reform's opponents criticised the loss of a key element for steering local school development and the increase of red tape.

In a context of economic uncertainty and fierce competition for access to universities and prestigious job positions, access to high-quality education has become one of the main priorities of middle- and upper-middle-class parents (Boterman, 2013; Butler and Hamnett, 2007; Vowden, 2012; Van Zanten, 2013). In Germany in particular, a country known for the strong relationship between a child's social background and its educational achievement, where the selection of pupils into different educational tracks sets the direction for divergent educational and occupational pathways at a very early stage, parents are increasingly coming under pressure to frame their children's educational careers. Consequently, access to the 'right' childcare and primary school is already considered high-risk (Becker and Reimer, 2010; Mierendorff et al., 2015).

Little in-depth research into parents' primary school choice strategies exists in Germany, with the few existing studies focusing mainly on a different institutional context – federal states in which catchment areas still exist (see

Breidenstein et al., 2014; Krüger, 2014; Noreisch, 2007a). In this context, some parents try to illegally circumvent the catchment areas, while others justify the 'acceptance' of the local school with their egalitarian ideals and the credence of existent rules (Noreisch, 2007a). Such deliberations, however, have become obsolete in NRW following changes in primary school admission policies and the formalisation of parental choice. Since policies not only allow or sanction certain practices, but also influence discourses on values and ideas (Raveaud and Van Zanten, 2007), the crucial question arises: How are parents reacting to the introduction of free choice?

Based on a mixed-methods approach, the paper's main aim is thus to provide insights into the impact of the policy reform on parent choice practices and subsequently on educational segregation. It seeks to understand how being raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system affects parents' understanding of the policy reform and impacts their choice strategies. Mülheim an der Ruhr[1], a city in NRW with an exceptional data base and a socially and ethnically diverse population, serves as an interesting case study. In a first step, the reform's impact on the development and scope of choice is analysed on the basis of quantitative, individual data. Since the analysis illustrates that choice patterns and the effects on schools vary throughout the city, the subsequent qualitative analysis was deliberately conducted in the area where the policy reform's effects on parental choice are the strongest – the mixed inner-city neighbourhoods. Interviews shed light on parents' underlying motives and deliberations, showing how parents from different social backgrounds cope with their new freedom of choice.

[1] For the sake of simplicity, Mülheim an der Ruhr is hereinafter referred to as 'Mülheim'.

School choice and the role of space

The growing segregation in cities across Europe is reflected in local school environments. The link between residential and school segregation is particularly noticeable in urban areas where a neighbourhood's socio-economic structure determines the initial selection of a school's pupils and potentially even their educational outcomes (Andersson et al., 2010; Bernelius and Vaattovaara, 2016; Nieuwenhuis and Hooimeijer, 2015). Although the significance of the effects differ, research could show that polarised school intakes lead to stronger inequalities of opportunities and affect overall pupil performance, once individual effects have been controlled for (Musset, 2012; Sykes and Kuyper, 2013; Thrupp et al., 2002). Residential and school segregation are thus tightly interlinked in a 'geography of education', whereby the latter is shown to be generally higher than the former (Burgess et al., 2005; Butler and Robson, 2003; Karsten et al., 2003; Rangvid, 2007). Being (provenly) socio-economically selective, however, parental choice often acts as a driver of school segregation (Allen, 2007; Bernelius and Vaattovaara, 2016; Östh et al., 2013).

In Germany, little in-depth research into the interplay between residential and school segregation exists. First research studies show that, although in most federal states primary school enrolment is organised by catchment areas, there is still limited room for choice through applying for an exception or choosing a denominational school, or illegally, by giving a false address (Noreisch, 2007b; Riedel et al., 2010). With the policy reform in NRW making such (illegal) choice

practices obsolete, this paper seeks to analyse the development of parental choice and school segregation.

School choice and the role of class

With educational achievement determining access to university and good jobs, it is crucial to 'maintaining and legitimising class differences' (Boterman, 2013: 1132). Access to high-quality education has thus become a sensitive topic especially for middle- and upper-middle-class parents (Butler and Hamnett, 2007).[2] Based on a changing view on parenthood and decreasing trust in the education system (Krüger, 2014), this development can also be observed in Germany. Parents are increasingly seen as key players responsible for their children's educational success and simultaneously as risk factors when unable to make informed decisions (Becker, 2010; Mierendorff et al., 2015). In NRW, where 'hiding' behind admission policies to justify choosing the local school is no longer possible, pressure to make informed decisions might even have intensified.

Both in popular and academic discourses, educational choice is mainly constructed as an implicit middle-class norm, where the (lacking) ability to take well-founded decisions is directly associated with parents' social status. In

[2] Due to changing occupations, labour market and income distribution, defining class has become increasingly difficult (Devine et al., 2005). Given the range of different theoretical and practical applications of class schemes, it rather seems to be impossible 'to identify particular schemes which are "right" or "wrong"; different schemes are rather more or less appropriate for particular tasks' (Crompton, 2008: 68-69). Class is often defined in terms of occupation or income. Our quantitative data base only includes information on parents' educational attainment. However, class is becoming more cultural (Bennett et al., 2009) and parents' cultural capital is crucial for school choice (Lareau, 1987). Thus, defining parents' social status solely by their educational attainment might be a good approximation (Blokland and Van Eijk, 2012) – in particular in Germany, where it plays a crucial role for social positioning. Nevertheless, due to the missing information, we decided to avoid the term 'class' in our data.

research on school choice, class is therefore one key dimension (Ball et al., 1996; Butler and Robson, 2003; Byrne, 2006; Vincent et al., 2010). Middle-class parents are generally characterised by rational, carefully considered choice-making, who do not only possess the social and cultural capital needed to take full advantage of the educational market, but are additionally greatly inclined to exercise choice (Ball, 2003; Gewirtz et al., 1995). Working-class parents seem to be the opposite, often characterised as unknowing and uncritical, assumedly placing less value on choice and lacking the capital needed to implement it (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Reay, 2001; Van Zanten, 2005). As some researchers argue, however, different choice practices are not only dependent on asymmetries in information and capabilities. The categorisation into skilled and less-skilled choosers is also a result of evaluating working-class parents' practices using normative constructions based on middle-class choice-making (Reay and Ball, 1997; Skeggs, 2004b).

Choice criteria

In contrast to the secondary school tracks with their obvious relationship between 'cultural profits' in terms of educational and occupational pathways, distinctions between comprehensive primary schools are fuzzy in Germany, lacking a 'clear cultural coding' (Bourdieu, 1986). As no data exists on primary schools' performance, parents are forced to use proxies to evaluate school performance.

As shown in several studies, the definition of the 'right' school is increasingly dependent on its composition: on the one hand, because composition is

assumed to be strongly linked to school performance; on the other, because middle-class parents in particular are worried about their children's exposure to lower standards of education or the 'wrong' types of socialisation (Boterman, 2013; Rangvid, 2007; Vowden, 2012). While performance, atmosphere and composition are mainly perceived as middle-class parents' choice criteria (Byrne, 2006; Reay, 2001), spatial proximity is merely associated with working-class parents' choices. Choosing the local school is often conceived as a non-choice reflecting lacking desire, knowledge and capabilities. Reasons deviating from middle-class norms, such as concerns about a child's ability to fit in at high-reputation schools, seem to be rather marginalised (Ravead and Van Zanten, 2007; Reay and Ball, 1997; Van Zanten, 2005).

In NRW, touting the policy reform as a tool to decrease inequality of choice by removing the bureaucratic barriers for socially disadvantaged families reveals similar patterns of middle-class norms. Not applying for schools other than the nearest one is interpreted as a deliberate choice of highly-educated parents, but is conversely ascribed to lacking desire and capabilities in disadvantaged families. Choice constraints other than bureaucratic hurdles seem to be neglected.

The role of (informal) information

Introducing choice and market-oriented mechanisms into education assumes that all participants start from the same position and have access to the same information (Ball, 2003; James et al., 2010). However, information is often limited and not equally accessible and decodable for different groups (Reay and

Lucey, 2004; Van Zanten, 2007). Informal information, so-called ‘grapevine knowledge’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998), is consequently a way of compensating for missing information or complementing ‘untrustworthy’ information. Additionally, it is used as confirmation and serves as a medium for social comparison, since choice is not only rational and individualised, but also influenced by emotions, concerns and moral dilemmas (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Frank and Weck, 2018; Kosunen and Carrasco, 2016; Oría et al., 2007; Vincent et al., 2010; Vowden, 2012). With choice strategies thus framed by social values, parents often feel pressured to conform to dominant norms regarding school-related social matching (Butler and Robson, 2003; Byrne, 2006; Van Zanten, 2013).

Research illustrates the diverging responses to grapevine knowledge: from suspicion to unconditional trust in its reliability (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Reay and Lucey, 2004; Van Zanten, 2007). In our case, where parents have been given free choice without being provided with the necessary formal information, grapevine knowledge is likely to be an indispensable information substitute for *all* parents (Krüger, 2014). However, as access to grapevines is inconsistent, we are interested in how different groups deal with free choice.

Educational policies and choice strategies

School choice is not only influenced by social networks, but also framed by existing rules, incentives and sanctions. We are thus interested in the impact of educational policies and the institutional context on parent choices. ‘Policies exert a powerful effect, both because they provide institutional arrangements that make certain practices possible and others not, and because they contain

discourses on values and ideas' (Raveaud and Van Zanten, 2007). Thus, in free choice contexts, it cannot only be assumed that parents are more likely to use this option, but also that the infusion of more market-oriented mechanisms is likely to exert a certain pressure, impacting parents' choice strategies.

As studies show, the impact of educational policies on choice strategies also depends on parents' values and the way they interact with contexts and resources (Raveaud and Van Zanten, 2007). A case study from Berlin, where primary school catchment areas still exist, shows that choice depends on parents' interpretation of the rules regulating school enrolment and is therefore a question of whether parents think they have a right to choose (Noreisch, 2007a). Although aware of the ways to circumvent enrolment rules, some parents defend their 'choice' of the catchment area school by upholding the state's right to allocate pupils. Consequently, choice 'is affected by both personal means to do so and the extent to which choice is valued' (Noreisch, 2007a: 1325). Parents raised in and accustomed to a catchment area system might thus be less willing to unconditionally accept illegal choice. But how would they react to the formalisation of choice? At this point, our case study steps in. The new NRW context, where admission policies have changed and traditional choice strategies have become obsolete, therefore provides an interesting context to analyse how the policy reform impacts local norms of choice and subsequently parent choice practices.

Research design

The case study Mülheim an der Ruhr

With its 170,000 inhabitants, Mülheim is part of a polycentric old-industrial area, the Ruhr, with about five million inhabitants. Hit by increasing (child) poverty, while at the same time the home of a comparatively high number of high-income citizens, social polarisation is even more pronounced than in neighbouring cities. This polarisation is also reflected in the city's social geography with its quite privileged southern and disadvantaged northern neighbourhoods – the latter being the home of many migrants and featuring high shares of benefit recipients (up to 63%). With shares between 20% and 40%, the inner-city neighbourhoods are socio-economically more mixed.

Data and methods[3]

Based on a research cooperation between the Ruhr-University Bochum and the city of Mülheim, an exceptional data base on children in childcare and primary schools was generated. It was built around the school entrance test, a compulsory physical and psychological test for all children changing to primary school and enabled access to the individual data of almost all first-grade schoolchildren between 2008 and 2016 (approx. 10,500 children). It was enriched by a detailed parents' questionnaire providing information on their social and ethnic backgrounds.

The study is based on a mixed-methods approach: The quantitative analysis examined the development and scope of school segregation as well as the

[3] While the quantitative analysis was prepared by Thomas Groos, the qualitative analysis – including a 7-week ethnographic fieldwork in three kindergartens, interviews with parents and heads of primary schools and kindergartens – was done by Isabel Ramos Lobato.

social selectivity[4] of choice. Since it revealed that choice patterns changed predominantly in the mixed inner-city neighbourhoods, this area was chosen for the subsequent qualitative analysis designed to give insights into parents' underlying motives and considerations. Three comparatively mixed kindergartens were chosen to recruit parents with children in their last year in kindergarten from different social backgrounds (35 in total). The interviews were conducted within the period in which parents had to apply for primary school. Half of the interviewees had a migration background, though all but six had grown up in Germany. All but four interviewees were female.

Setting the context: The German and North Rhine-Westphalian school system

The German education system is known for its comparatively high level of social selectivity and inequality. In all federal states – the political level responsible for education in Germany – primary schools are the only schools where all children of one age group are taught collectively. They traditionally enable short distances between home and school. Access is mainly organised through catchment areas, whereas there has always been room for (illegal) choice; in NRW even legally by applying to attend a denomination school.

After four (in some states six) years of joint schooling, pupils are assigned to different educational tracks preparing for divergent educational and occupational pathways. Transition regulations differ between the federal states,

[4] The data analysis is based on a classification of parents according to their educational attainment used in the statistics of the City of Mülheim. There are three groups: The category 'high educational attainment' comprised all parents with at least a higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*) or a university degree, 'medium' all with a school-leaving qualification below *Gymnasium*, but with completed vocational education. All parents without any completed vocational training (and not having *Abitur*) are classified as 'low educational attainment'.

but predominantly depend on the primary school's recommendation. In NRW, however, the final decision is left up to parents. The *Gymnasium* is the highest secondary track leading directly to university, while the highly stigmatised *Hauptschule* is the lowest one. Since switching from a lower to a higher track remains the exception (Bellenberg and Forell, 2012), the transition to secondary school has broad implications for a child's educational career. The choice of primary school is thus seen as a crucial first step. However, official information on school performance, such as rankings or test scores, is non-existent. Little information can be accessed through schools' websites or their open days, and in any case is not objectifiable and often fuzzy to interpret.

Development and scope of school segregation in Mülheim

As our analysis clearly shows, parents' choice patterns changed significantly after the introduction of free school choice. Whereas before 2008, just 10% of first-grade schoolchildren in Mülheim were sent to a primary school outside their catchment area, this share tripled to almost 31% in 2016/2017. Almost half of parents making use of free choice were well-educated (also the biggest group in numbers). When measuring the shares within each group (parents with a high, medium and low educational attainment), the latter were most likely to select the school within the former catchment area, though differences were small.

The data analysis also reveals the social selectivity of choice: When the primary school in the former catchment area had a high share of children of benefit-

recipients / with a migration background[5], only 33.8% / 31.2% of well-educated parents enrolled their children there. The shares increased according to a school's composition: 60.1% / 42.1% enrolled there when the composition was average and 66.8% / 76.8% when the school had only low shares of such children (see Figure 1). Thus, these parents gave preference to the nearest primary school, but only if it had the 'right' composition. Less-educated parents were more inclined to select the nearest primary school, with more than 60.3% enrolling their children there even if it had high shares of children of benefit-recipients / with a migration background. We are aware of the endogeneity problem in the figure resulting from the *ex post* analysis of school choice and its relationship to a school's composition without excluding the single choices and their impact on composition. However, this analysis is based on the data of *all* first-grade schoolchildren over four consecutive years (approximately 4,700 in total and 200 on average per school), during which the schools' composition changed constantly, but only slowly. We therefore consider the problem as statistically negligible. Moreover, we checked this effect in a different, multilevel analysis measuring the impact of the social context of the neighbourhood and kindergarten on a child's abilities: Excluding each child's own social background had no significant effects on the model's results.

[insert Figure 1. School choice according to parents' educational attainment and primary school social and ethnic composition (2012/2013-2015/2016).

Source: School entrance test 2012/2013-2015/2016 and Referat V.1, Mülheim an der Ruhr]

[5] According to the official statistics of the City of Mülheim, children with a 'migration background' are defined as such when they or their parents were not born in Germany or one of the three does not have a German passport.

Our analysis shows that school choice is socially selective and depends both on parents' educational attainment and a school's social and ethnic composition. These rather descriptive results were also confirmed by a multi-level regression analysis.[6] The relationship seemed stronger for a school's ethnic composition, though this might also be a result of the higher numbers of children with a migration background and a subsequently more balanced distribution. Moreover, the indicators for the schools' social and ethnic composition correlate highly (0.95/Pearson).

To analyse the scope of school segregation, the dissimilarity indexes were calculated. They are based on data from 2012/13 through to 2015/16, though it had to be combined due to the low number of pupils in some schools. The indexes indicate the share of the observed minority (here: children whose parents have a low educational attainment and children with a migration background)[7] who would have to be redistributed to achieve an equal distribution of all children throughout the schools. The actual dissimilarity indexes are subsequently compared with the hypothetical ones, reflecting the distribution if every child attended the nearest primary school. The results revealed an 11-percentage-point difference between the hypothetical (35%) and the actual social dissimilarity index (46%). Primary school social segregation would thus be considerably lower if school catchment areas still existed. Ethnic segregation was lower, with the hypothetical dissimilarity index (30%) and the actual one (33%) only differing by three percentage points. Whereas the latter has slightly decreased over the last years, social segregation has grown

[6] The authors are able to provide the results of the multi-level regression analysis as technical appendix, if requested.
[7] The total shares are 11.7% and 45%.

significantly (almost 10 percentage points). The dissimilar development might be explained by the increased integration of immigrants and the heightened segregation along poverty lines or.

Analysing the average, city-wide effects of choice, the dissimilarity index gives no indication of the impact on individual schools. We therefore compared the actual registration numbers and the actual composition of each school with the hypothetical scenario. The comparison reveals that choice patterns vary spatially and that the reform affects schools to a very different extent: On the one hand, the schools located in the city's most privileged – mostly southern – neighbourhoods are hardly affected by changing choice patterns. Being surrounded by highly reputable schools with a privileged composition, parents living in these neighbourhoods have no need to opt out of the local school; choosing a primary school other than the nearest one would not lead to any 'improvement' and is thus unnecessary. By contrast, in the mixed inner-city neighbourhoods the effects of free choice are comparatively strong, exacerbating the situations of already disadvantaged schools with shrinking registration numbers and increasing shares of children of benefit-recipients.[8] In these neighbourhoods where schools with a quite dissimilar composition are located not very far from each other, parents seem to select carefully. Thus, while residential and school segregation are very much linked in the more privileged areas, the latter tends to exceed the former in more mixed inner-city neighbourhoods. Against this background, the qualitative analysis was conducted in the inner-city neighbourhoods where the effects of the policy

[8] Moreover, these schools are additionally hit by the highest shares of children unable to speak German at all, in most cases refugees. Even though the unequal distribution of these children can often be explained by the refugees' residence, it nevertheless exacerbates the already demanding situation in some Mülheim primary schools.

reform are the strongest, trying to gain deeper insights into the underlying rationalities and motives of choice.

Making use of free school choice: Parents' strategies and their interpretation of the policy reform

Parental narratives illustrated that, while they all appreciated the new right to choose, choice criteria differed. Interestingly, it was not only the choice criteria that varied, but also the conclusions parents drew from the policy reform and the significance they attributed to primary school choice: two aspects strongly interlinked with parent choice practices.

Choice criteria and practices of distinction

As already illustrated by the data analysis, most parents still appreciated spatial proximity between home and school. For less-educated parents it was by far the most crucial criterion – not based on lacking desire and knowledge (Ravead and Van Zanten, 2007) – but rather as a result of economic and organisational constraints in managing daily life and combining family and work life, as Serkan illustrates:

'The first criterion is spatial proximity since the child has to walk to school. If you have time, money, a driving licence and a car, for those parents it doesn't matter how far the school is away. They can attend any school they like. But we

cannot. We don't have a car, I work shifts and my wife has no driving licence.' *(Serkan, home carer, low educational attainment)* [9]

For highly-educated parents, however, spatial proximity was appreciated, but not pursued at any price. They rather strove for school performance. However, as official and objectifiable information is lacking, proxies, perceived to be associated with school performance and gathered arduously through informal information, are used instead. The main performance proxy was a school's composition: ethnic composition based on the association that children with a migration background have insufficient German language skills and a subsequent need for additional support (Noreisch, 2007b; Vowden, 2012), and social composition by the simple avoidance of the 'wrong' types of socialisation, namely children with bad manners and diction, possibly rubbing off on their own children. A school's composition was often evaluated by 'passing by' and observing visible indicators of children's backgrounds – besides being 'informed' by other parents. Another important performance indicator was the transition rate to the *Gymnasium,* accessed through grapevine knowledge and – although officially not allowed to circulate this information – headteachers, who nevertheless often downplayed their promotional role in advertising or canvassing (Ramos Lobato, 2017). Additional information on schools, such as the offer of afternoon care for children – an aspect playing a crucial role for almost all parents – was accessed through school websites and open days.

[9] Since all interviews (with exception of one) were conducted in German, all quotes in this paper were translated.

School performance was also a key concern for less-educated parents, though assessment criteria tended to be rather abstract, mainly based on gut feeling and on other parents' often unquestioned recommendations – whereby a significantly smaller number of parents were asked.

''The other mother said the teachers are good. The school is good. The children will learn well.' (Avan, on parental leave, no school-leaving qualification)"

A school's composition played an important role for choice; less in terms of a performance indicator, but more as a matching criterion. Apart from avoiding schools with a high share of children with a migration background assumed to show deviant behaviour and bad manners, less-educated parents also tended to shy away from highly reputable schools. Boundary-drawing is thus also exercised vis-à-vis parents with a higher social status, as Sophie explained:

'*This school is out of question since it's only attended by children with parents […] from a higher social class. […] Many think 'I am better than you.' It's about the character of the people there. There are unfortunately only well-heeled ones. And I guess you just don't get in contact with the parents there.' (Sophie, saleswoman, low educational attainment)*

These schools – located outside the mixed inner-city neighbourhoods – were thus not, as perhaps expected, the number-one choice. As Sophie's quote illustrates, shying away from these schools was less due to concerns about

their *children's* prospects at that school and the concern of setting them up to fail (Reay and Ball, 1997; Van Zanten, 2013), but rather related to parents' own compatibility and self-esteem. These concerns were partly based on experiences with well-educated parents' haughtiness and rejection in kindergarten, aspects to be avoided in primary school. Interestingly, the avoidance of highly reputable primary schools also applied to a small group of highly-educated parents (for more information on this specific aspect see Ramos Lobato et al., forthcoming).

As illustrated, the absence of official, objectifiable information makes it not only difficult and arduous to make an informed decision, but additionally requires a certain level of cultural capital to decode available knowledge. Since not all parents had access to the same level of information, not all of them were able to take full advantage of the educational 'market' that the policy reform initiated. Apart from the differences arising from information asymmetries, the analysis additionally revealed divergent 'logics' of choice. The disinclination to choose highly reputable schools pointed to lower-educated parents marginalised position in official debates, revealing the contradictions between the reform's intentions and parental reactions. While politicians also touted the reform as an opportunity for socially disadvantaged families to access schools outside their immediate surroundings, their economic and organisational constraints as well as emotional concerns to do so were not really considered. Despite all differences, one common element of choice – albeit based on different reasons and concerns – was matching with the children (and their parents) attending these schools. Both groups' matching preferences thus exacerbated primary school segregation.

Perceived significance and evaluation of free primary school choice

Well-educated parents. These parents highly appreciated their freedom of choice since, in their opinion, parents knew their children best. At the same time, however, due to the lack of information on school performance, many felt uncertain and forsaken in their decision-making. To make the 'right' choice, they thus tried to get as much informal information as possible, sometimes even leading to greater confusion. Apart from missing information and support, parents' uncertainty was ascribed to the great responsibility they felt. Primary school choice was often seen as an important step to the *Gymnasium* – and subsequently, to university – and thus perceived as the cornerstone for a child's future educational career.

At the same time, however, many parents who had grown up in a system where almost everybody attended the nearest primary school and in which primary schools had always been a symbol for equality in teaching and comprehensive learning were doubtful about the existence of school performance differences and consequently about the significance of choice per se. Nevertheless, schools' obviously different compositions and rumours about dissimilar transition rates to the *Gymnasium* – both perceived as strongly interrelated with performance – nourished parents' vague impression that choosing a specific primary school might make a difference, as the following quotes exemplarily illustrate.

‘I guess that the primary schools have strict curricula, meaning that it’s not that important which school the child goes to. […] I don’t think there will be any great differences between the schools; but perhaps between the clientele who attend the school.’ (Dana, management assistant, high educational attainment)

‘And the headteacher also mentioned the share of children going to the Gymnasium. Many children attending this school go on to a Gymnasium. She said, there are only few, very few, who now attend a Hauptschule.’ (Kim, physician, high educational attainment)

Parents were thus torn between their (traditional) belief in similar curricula on the one hand and their perception of differences on the other. Even though some parents, as Julia, viewed the hype about primary school choice as exaggerated, the risk of making the ‘wrong’ decision was perceived as being too high to evade.

‘I sometimes wonder if parents hype primary school choice too much. […] At the same time, I am concerned that when you live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, teachers spend too much time managing certain things instead of teaching. And that’s a pity for the children who are smart enough to learn more.’ (Julia, physician, high educational attainment)

The described uncertainties also revealed the interplay between parent choice practices and the formalistion of choice. Parents started to question their own

experience in times when it was absolutely normal to attend the nearest primary school.

‘*For me, it was very difficult to choose, since you definitely only want the best for your child. And then I think: “Oh my god, in former times, my parents just sent me to the nearest primary school. And nonetheless I developed quite well.”’ (Nadia, civil servant, high educational attainment)*

The introduction of free choice, however, has changed the situation and seems to be interpreted as a clear signal or even a request to consciously and carefully choose the primary school instead of just picking the nearest one. Thus, to a certain degree, the policy reform seems to have triggered the implicit pressure parents feel when choosing a primary school. Spatial proximity between home and school – even though still appreciated – was understood as not necessarily being the most important criterion anymore. Parents who nevertheless chose the nearest school frequently justified their decision by emphasising that their choice was built on a careful consideration of the school’s performance and matching their child’s individual needs. As already illustrated by Noreisch (2007a: 1313), being a ‘good parent’ is increasingly associated with being a ‘choosing parent’.

This pressure was exacerbated by other parents who played a key role in providing informal information about schools. Social comparisons among parents were frequent and choice practices seemed to be intensively framed by social norms and values (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Being the only one just

accepting the primary school next door without spending time and effort in decision-making could hardly be justified. Thus, local peer pressure was not only effective in forcing parents to conform to dominant norms defining the 'right' school (Van Zanten, 2013), as Hanna's quote illustrates, but even in forcing them to choose at all.

'And added to that, all children from my child's kindergarten went to this school that allegedly had the best reputation. They told me that all kids from this kindergarten went on to that primary school and then directly to Gymnasium. I heard that from many parents. And the same thing happens now with my oldest daughter with secondary school choice. Everyone tells you: 'You have to register your child here at this Gymnasium. It is awesome, the best Gymnasium ever'. (Hanna, economist, high educational attainment)

Apart from the decision-making, parents felt similarly insecure about their own agency within the choice process. Once the difficult decision to enrol the child at a certain school had been made, concerns arose about the chances of getting into that school. The absence of concrete information about the schools'admission process led to a discrepancy between the pressure and responsibility parents felt on the one hand and their limited room for manoeuvre on the other; thereby fuelling their uncertainty and discontent.

Less-educated parents. These parents appreciated the introduction of free choice, though the underlying rationale often stayed rather abstract.

‘Yeah, because... You are not forced to register your child somewhere where you don’t want to register your child or where the child doesn’t want to go. Hm… Like this, you can at least get an own impression and decide what you think is best.‘ (Tina, working in a sun-tan studio, low educational attainment)

They did not spend that much time collecting information and attending various school open days, though this was not necessarily due to lacking interest. Apart from deviating choice criteria leading to the choice of the local school, the relaxed way of dealing with free choice was highly dependent on the perception that all primary schools offered the same quality and taught the same topics.

‘*I think all primary schools are the same since in all schools they learn reading, writing and arithmetic.’ (Anne, carer in a retirement home, low educational attainment)*

Without any doubts about differences between the performance and pedagogical profiles of different primary schools, a careful selection was considered unnecessary. Consequently, such parents seemed to feel hardly any pressure to intensively and carefully choose – neither triggered by the policy reform, nor intensified by (the small number of) other parents asked for their recommendations.

Similar to their well-educated counterparts, they also assessed a child’s learning progress in his/her first four years at school as being important for

success in secondary school. This was not, however, associated at all with the 'right' primary school, but rather with factors depicted as being outside one's own sphere of influence: teacher performance and a child's willingness to learn and endeavour.

'I don't think that the school is so important. The teachers are the important ones. It has nothing to do with the school. If the child is lucky, he gets a good teacher. If not, then it's a catastrophe […] But unfortunately, you don't have any influence over the teacher.' (Omar, unemployed, low educational attainment)

'*It all depends on the child. If my child is not cooperating, he stays where he is. It's just like that. […] He can go to the best school with the best teachers, if he doesn't cooperate, it won't work out.' (Sophie, saleswoman, low educational attainment)*

In both cases, school choice was perceived as largely dependent on the luck of the draw, consequently mitigating parents' perception of the significance of primary school choice.

The more relaxed way of dealing with primary school choice seemed to be additionally based on the low significance attached to this early stage of schooling. This should not be equated with a lack of interest: the interviewed less-educated parents were concerned about their children's success in school and harboured similar hopes. Moreover, aware of the different secondary school tracks and their wider implications for their children's educational

careers, they consequently attached great(er) importance to the choice of secondary school. By contrast, however, they did not seem to establish a link between primary and secondary school choice.

'*In my opinion, primary schools are all the same. Perhaps they differ a little bit. Thus, for the first four years, it makes no difference. But for secondary school, then I have to choose carefully. […] I would like my child to go to a Gymnasium later.' (Milena, unemployed, low-educational attainment)*

Since attending a 'good' primary school was not seen as a direct step towards the *Gymnasium*, primary school choice was not driven by the same level of relevance and responsibility and the subsequent anxieties and concerns.

Conclusion

The paper illustrates that choices of a school outside the former catchment area increased after 2008 andhave led to a higher level of school segregation throughout Mülheim, whereby the effects of free choice vary tremendously between schools. Apart from spatial proximity, perceived school performance is a decisive element of choice. Faced with a dearth of official and objectifiable information, parents are forced to collect informal information and to use proxies perceived to be associated with school performance. Since parents possess different social and cultural capital to access and interpret this knowledge and face divergent economic and practical constraints, choice practices vary distinctively. Nevertheless, the social matching of children and parents as well

as subsequent dissociation practices seem to be equally relevant – not only for well-educated parents, as the literature predominantly assumes, but also for less-educated ones. Consequently, both groups tend to make choices contributing to higher levels of educational segregation.

Differences between parent choice strategies do not solely result from their differing access to (informal) information and their ability to interpret it, but also depend on the different significance parents attach to this early stage of education and are shaped by their interpretation of the policy reform's intentions. Most parents appreciate free choice; nevertheless, in particular among well-educated parents it also fuels uncertainty and concerns. Their vague impression of the significance of primary school choice for their children's future educational careers seems to have been triggered and intensified by the policy reform, interpreted as a clear instigation to carefully choose between schools.

In this case study, where a reform put an end to any bureaucratic obstacles to free choice, the (illegal) circumvention of catchment areas has become unnecessary. The introduction of free choice seems to put pressure on (well-educated) parents, increasing their feeling of the 'choosing parent' being the 'good parent'. While parents in catchment area systems can evade that pressure by justifying their choice of the local school with their acceptance of rules (Noreisch, 2007a), this seems to be increasingly difficult in NRW. Consequently, choice is not solely interpreted as an opportunity, but seems to have also become a duty. However, based on the city's social geography, choice practices vary spatially. Living in the more mixed inner-city neighbourhoods surrounded by schools with quite different compositions and

reputations, parents in our case study might be affected by the reform and the subsequent pressure to choose to a far greater extent than parents living in more affluent neighbourhoods.

Moreover, as ‘choice is a particularly middle-class way of operating in the world’ (Skeggs, 2004a: 139), the introduction of free choice seems to pander to well-educated parents’ concerns – although at the same time making them feel insecure about their decision – rather than giving more opportunities to those not so good at playing the game. By solely removing the bureaucratic barriers without offering a solution to the economic and organisational constraints, the reform does not endow disadvantaged parents with the opportunity to choose other than the nearest schools. Moreover, by not providing any adequate information, it additionally frames a class advantage by benefiting well-educated parents’ abilities to play the game. Thus, instead of alleviating existing inequalities in choice, the reform rather seems to perpetuate them. It one-sidedly favours well-educated parents’ interests and, as this case study clearly illustrates, even encourages them to strive for them.

This case study is a clear illustration of how norms of choice and choice practices are shaped by the institutional context parents operate in. Despite all concerns and anxieties, equipping parents with the right to choose ‘opened a Pandora's box and generated needs difficult to withdraw’, claimed a leading Social Democrat (SPD) politician in NRW in an interview for this research study. This might be the reason why, in 2010, the incoming coalition of SPD and the Green Party – the reform’s former opponents – did not dare roll back the reform. The increased share of social and ethnic school segregation in Mülheim illustrates the need for a critical examination of how decision-making

decentralisation is producing and reproducing inequalities. However, the responsibility for this development should not be attributed solely to the parents. The case study clearly illustrates that their selective choices have been triggered and even intensified by the policy reform. Thus, it is the political institutions and policies that create both the context and the legitimisation of choice.

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